

A METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH FOR THE STUDY OF EXPORT GROUPING SCHEMES

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ABSTRACT

Export grouping schemes have assumed an increasing role in the process of internationalization, especially for small- and medium-sized companies. Its network character has received the attention of a number of researchers who have focused both on their creation and development. Although cooperation has been recognized as a central feature, its collective action nature has been neglected. This paper aims at developing a methodological approach which takes into account that most export schemes involve a variety of actors who share common interests and are concerned with the promotion or defense of their collective interests.

Introduction

Firms are not independent entities acting on their own in the market. To develop their activity they have to interact with other firms and organizations such as governmental departments, associations or regulatory commissions. This process of interaction may give rise to lasting and stable relations through which companies adjust products, production and routines. Such relations are often built over a long period since their development requires time and resources, and may involve commitments for the future. Firms' behavior can thus be described as a cumulative process where relationships are

created and developed to guarantee firms' control over the resources they need, the selling of their output, and the pursuit of their objectives. This system of interdependent organizations engaged in the production, distribution and utilization of goods and services, forms a network where the particular position assumed by one firm affects not only its performance but also the evolution of other actors.

This view of markets as networks owes much to the research developed by the IMP (International/Industrial Marketing and Purchasing) group. The seminal studies were carried out at the University of Uppsala and Stockholm School of Economics in early 80s, and later developed by other research centers (cf. Håkansson, 1982; Axelsson and Easton, 1992; Naudé and Turnbull, 1998; Ford et al., 1998; Gadde and Håkansson, 2001; Håkansson, Harrison and Waluszewski, 2004).

Cooperation is a key feature within the conceptual framework of the IMP group. Whilst accepting the existence of formal types of collaborative arrangements, this stream of research has developed a model of industrial networks where informal cooperation assumes a central place. A significant number of studies have demonstrated that in most cases cooperation among firms is not based on administrative procedures or supported by formal contractual arrangements. On the contrary, assuming an informal nature, it is created gradually, based on the need for coordination and on inter-firm bonds, and results in a progressive reinforcement of trust between the parties.

Nevertheless, inter-organizational cooperation is by no means neither confined to formal contractual arrangements, nor to dyadic informal cooperative relationships such as the ones that have attracted the attention of most network approach's researchers.

Cooperation may also take the form of a collective action involving a variety of actors who, sharing common interests, are concerned with the promotion or defense of their mutual interests.

A case of cooperative arrangements in international business is export grouping schemes. Often encompassing a collective action character, they have assumed an increasing role in the process of internationalization, especially for small- and medium-sized companies. The objective of this paper is to develop a methodological approach for the study of export grouping schemes which takes into account their collective nature. The paper is divided in four sections. The first elaborates on the concept of export grouping scheme, and attempts to put in evidence its collective nature. The second section focuses on the concept of issue-based net and shows how it can be used in research on export schemes. The next section addresses the Vitrocristal case. This is an export grouping scheme aimed at increasing the competitiveness of the Portuguese crystal industry during the 90s. The last section makes clear the contribution of the concept of issue-based net as a methodological construct particularly appropriate for the understanding of cooperative phenomena.

The Collective Nature of Export Grouping Schemes

Ghauri et al. (2003) classify export marketing problems in two categories: internal and external. The first have in general to do with organizational resources whose lack may have significant influence on export performance of manufacturing firms. They include the lack of suitable quality, image and design for the foreign market (Czinkota and

Rocks, 1983; Kaynak and Kothtari, 1984) as well as problems stemming from poor organizational and personnel resources (Yang et al., 1992). On the other hand, external problems are associated with factors of the macro environment, the industry and the export market that may act as barriers or limitations to the expansion of the activity in foreign markets (Ramaseshan and Soutar, 1995).

Export grouping schemes are often used to deal with these difficulties. Assuming a variety of forms ranging from trade missions to export consortia, they aim to facilitate the penetration in foreign markets (Wilkinson et al., 1998). Such schemes can be both vertical and horizontal. The former, also labeled marketing channels networks, are those that “efficiently promote, modify and move goods to markets. In doing so the channel participant adds value to the product and shares profit and market risk with partners in the channel” (Ghauri et al., 2003, p. 731). On the other hand, horizontal schemes are those whose members are competitors. The rationales for their creation may have to do with the fact of participants want to jointly exploit a market opportunity, to deal with a marketing threat or to improve production efficiency.

The benefits of an export grouping scheme result from the coordination of activities among its members (Wilkinson, et al., 1998). The benefits can be measured both in terms of efficiency (e.g., sharing of resources to hold up international marketing activities) and effectiveness (e.g. gaining greater impact from a given amount of resources allocated).

Despite their potential benefits, export grouping schemes may be difficult to emerge and develop. Meulenber (1998) suggest three conditions for the emergence of an export

network. Firstly, a common challenge should exist in the international market. This can stem for instance from a lack of market information, limited financial resources, insufficient human resources or lack of capacity in terms of design and quality. Secondly, companies should prefer to respond jointly inasmuch as they are aware of the potential benefits. Finally, the outcome produced by the scheme should be important for the income formation of the participants.

The process of network development also raises some difficulties. Welch and Joynt (1987) suggest two major factors that tend to determine the success of an export grouping scheme. The first determinant concerns the attitude of the members of the group in terms of solidarity, cohesion and commitment. Both the size and composition of the group are key features. As the size expands, solidarity, cohesion and commitment tend to become more difficult. The same way, "... the greater the substitutability of different firms' products the more this is likely to promote competition instead of co-operation" (Rosson and Blunden, 1985, p. 4). The second determinant concerns the evolution of foreign market penetration activities. In this case, the key elements are the access to foreign marketing experience and know-how, the access to foreign marketing networks, and support infrastructure.

On the basis of Håkansson and Snehota's (1995) work on network change, Welch et al. (1996) provide an understanding of export schemes' benefits from a relational point of view. Such changes may occur in three key dimensions of inter-organizational relationships: activity links, resource ties and actor bonds. "Activity links refer to the ways in which the various activities performed by two firms in the relationship are coordinated and adapted to each other. Resource ties refer to the way in which tangible

and intangible resources supporting the activities of two firms in a relationship become oriented towards and integrated with each other. Actor bonds refer to the way in which the parties involved in a relationship perceive and identify with each other.” (op. cit., p. 464).

The article that Welch and her colleagues wrote in 1996 is considered a landmark in the literature on export grouping schemes since it provided a first approach to their understanding from a network point of view. As the authors put it, “export grouping schemes have not generally been conceived or analyzed in network terms, yet their underlying logic is clearly network-related” (op. cit., p. 464).

A central feature of export schemes is cooperation. According to Easton and Araújo (1992, p. 76), this “... occurs when two or more parties have objectives which are mutually dependent”. As a matter of fact, Welch et al. (1996) state that such schemes assume the form of a network among firms sharing common interests regarding internationalization issues. “The logic of such schemes is that companies should be able to achieve far more impact in a foreign market by acting in combination rather than singly, with resources being pooled and costs, information and experiences being shared” (op. cit., p. 464).

However, the cooperative character of an export grouping scheme usually involves forms of collective action. A collective action arise when a variety of actors join efforts to cope with a collectively recognized issue by influencing the structure and evolution of the systems to which they belong through an increased control over activities, resources and other actors (Brito, 1999). This is clear in Wilkinson’s et al. (1998, p.

493) argument that “... for cooperation to develop group members must recognize and value the potential gains to be made. However, these may be outweighed by the potential costs. They must perceive that the potential gains outweigh the costs and the contributions to be made”. Using a collective action terminology, what Wilkinson and his colleagues mean is that companies will join schemes that provide them with a collective good that compensates their individual costs for the provision of the collective benefit.

What is then a collective action? And what is its impact on the research on export grouping schemes? In general, organizations which develop an activity towards the provision of collective benefits acquire the bulk of their resources from contributions from their members. These contributions can take a variety of forms such as money, materials, services and time. Collective action problems may arise when members of such organizations are free to choose whether to contribute or not to the provision of the collective benefit. In a situation like this, self interest may induce participants not to join the action because they may benefit from the effort of the others without paying for it. In this context, free-riding is the opposite of cooperation since this means to contribute to the collective action and, thus, to relegate self-interest to second place. In short, cooperation becomes a matter of a tension between individual and collective interests which, in most cases, assumes the nature of a conflict between short and long term interests.

Most of the theoretical and empirical research on problems of individual versus collective rationality owes much to Mancur Olson's seminal contribution addressed in *The Logic of Collective Action* (1965). This book, beginning with an analysis and

conceptualization of the so-called collective action problem, attempts to establish ways of inducing people to cooperate on a collective basis. Olson concentrates his efforts on the study of organizations which provide public or collective goods - i.e. "goods that are available to everyone if they are available to anyone" (op. cit., p. 14). Such organizations may assume, for example, the form of business cartels, professional pressure groups, trade unions, and, of course, export grouping schemes.

From an inter-organizational point of view, a collective actor is a net of relationships created in order to cope with a collectively perceived and shared issue (Brito, 1999). Collective actors may or may not adopt formalized structures. The former are those that, being created through an explicit contract, assume a formal structure. They encompass such different forms as trade associations, farmer cooperatives, consortia of firms for joint sourcing, and regulatory commissions. However, non-formalized collective actors may also come into existence as simply virtual nets of relationships without any kind of formal organizational structure supporting them. This may be the case of informal groups of actors developing lobbying activities. They exist as a collective actor since a net of relationships has been set and developed in order to perform a particular collective action. In short, formalized or not, collective actors consist of nets of relationships that support the formulation of internal rules, the making of decisions, and the implementation and execution of their actions.

Since export grouping schemes are collective actors, the methodology for their study gains an extra importance if it takes into consideration that fact. In this context, the concept of issue-based net is likely to open new avenues in this front since it is particularly appropriate for the study of collective action phenomena. Introduced by

Brito (1999), the concept was later developed by other researchers who applied it to different contexts. For instance, Komppula (2000) used it to study regional tourism networks in Finland, Mustikkamäki et al. (2001) in the study of urban networks, and Mäkinen (2002) to study innovation networks and start-up companies.

Issue-Based Net as Sampling Unit

The way any research project is conducted depends on a number of factors, each comprising several dimensions, which tends to influence the basic methodological options adopted by the researcher. Easton (1995) suggests that the most important determinants are the research goals, and the content and context of the research project.

The type of research addressed in this article aims at understanding the emergence and development of export grouping schemes. This broad objective can be operationalized through two more specific research questions: (i) Why do firms join efforts to operate in the international market, rather than adopt a more individualistic strategy? (ii) How do such cooperative arrangements developed?

A number of methodological decisions flow directly and indirectly from these research questions. First of all, the research questions have important sampling implications. Firstly, they mean that data collection focuses on a limited number of specific issues which stem from the content of the research questions: internationalization, competitiveness and cooperation. In addition, the research questions determine the kind

of actors to look at: those who, being involved in the export grouping scheme, are likely to have a significant role in its creation and development.

Furthermore, the methodological decisions are not solely influenced by the content of the research questions. They are also affected by the way such questions are expressed. On the one hand, the two research questions assume a somewhat broad and unstructured character which calls for a methodological approach mainly exploratory in nature. As Strauss and Corbin (1994) put it, if the researcher aims to break new ground in a number of aspects, the methodology should be particularly appropriate understand what lies behind any phenomenon about which little is yet known. On the other hand, the research questions are formulated in terms of 'why' and 'how' rather than 'what', 'when' or 'where'. This clearly demands a methodological approach mainly explanatory rather than descriptive. Quoting Yin (1994, p. 18), "... this is because such questions deal with operational links needing to be traced over time, rather than mere frequency or incidence."

The second major determinant of methodology is the content and context of the study. As stated before, the theoretical background is based on the research conducted by the IMP Group. This stream of research, adopting a network approach, attempts to describe and understand industrial systems in terms of three basic variables: actors, activities and resources (Ford, 2002). Actors are individuals, firms, groups of individuals, groups of firms, or even parts of firms. They are goal oriented and perform activities by using, consuming and creating resources. These may have an unlimited number of dimensions, which allow for their utilization in a number of different ways. Nevertheless, for the sake of simplicity, it is usual to subdivide them in four main categories: physical

resources (e.g. materials, equipment or buildings), financial resources, human resources, and intangible resources such as knowledge and brand image. When actors combine, develop, exchange or create resources they perform activities.

Within the three basic variables (actors, activities and resources), connections established among their elements tend to give rise to structures that can be conceived as networks (Easton, 2004). Actors, for instance, can be bound together not only by formal arrangements but also by product and process adjustments, logistical coordination and personal ties. In the same way, activities are related to each other in accordance with, for example, technological patterns or power-dependence relationships between actors. This means that the three networks are connected with each other forming an overall network of relations.

One of the most central features of industrial networks' studies is connectedness (Havila, Forsgren and Håkansson, 2002). And connectedness has significant sampling implications. In fact, methodologies exclusively reliant on statistical inference are, *a priori*, rejected since they usually require independence amongst sampling units. The point is that this requirement cannot be fulfilled by network studies inasmuch as these assume that sampling units are connected and thus interdependent. This characteristic demands methodological approaches that treat the representativeness of samples not in statistical terms.

Moreover, the connectedness character of network studies demands the use of large networks as sampling units. However, this option raises two major difficulties. Firstly, studying a single large network is in most cases impossible or, at least, extremely

difficult. Secondly, it restricts the access to a considerable number of methodologies based on the logic of replication - i.e. "the logic of treating a series of cases as a series of experiments with each case serving to confirm or disconfirm the hypotheses" (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 542). These are the reasons why network studies have usually adopted smaller sampling units such as focal organizations or dyads.

Taking these considerations into account, the choice of the sampling unit for the study of export grouping schemes is the outcome of a trade-off between two extreme options. On the one hand, the collective character of the research problem does not allow for the use of focal organizations (nor even dyads) as sampling units. On the other hand, adopting the overall network as sampling unit would probably raise a number of difficulties resulting from the complexity of the work and the impossibility of replication.

In this context, the issue-bed net can be particularly useful for the study of these phenomena. According to Brito (1999), an issue-based net is a form of association mainly based on cooperative relationships amongst actors who aim to cope with a collectively recognized issue by influencing the structure and evolution of the system(s) to which they belong through an increased control over activities, resources and/or other actors. The roots of this concept can be found in three streams of research: policy networks studies (cf. Marin and Mayntz, 1991; Scharpf, 1993), organization and marketing studies (cf. Nohria and Eccles, 1992; Iacobucci, 1996) and management studies (cf. Dutton and Webster, 1988; Dutton et al., 1997).

An issue-based net may aggregate mutual interests of various types of actors through processes of interaction and exchange - e.g. social, economic, or political - whose objective is to cope with a collective issue by changing (or preserving) the shape of the network where its members are embedded. They may or may not adopt formalized structures. Formalized issue-based nets are those created through an explicit contract, and assuming a formal structure and organization.

Issue-based nets may not only affect the organization of individual actors and their strategies. Given that they tend to aggregate a disparate set of actions into a unified and coherent action, they are also likely to influence the processes, the structure of relationships, and therefore the balance of power within industrial networks. This means that cooperation, assuming the form of collective action, may play a key role in shaping the 'rules of the game' and the structure of the network. From this point of view, cooperation, complementarity, and coordination must be perceived in the context of groups of actors (i.e. nets), rather than at a mere dyadic level.

In large and heterogeneous groups, the emergence and development of issue-based nets may be dependent on the role played by an inner core of highly resourceful and interested members which may provide the critical mass necessary for the establishment of the net of relationships. According to Oliver and Marwell and their associates (cf. Oliver, Marwell and Teixeira, 1985; Marwell, Oliver and Pahl, 1988), such a small subset of interested actors may be sufficient to mobilize time, money and other resources towards the production of a collective benefit despite the fact that the majority of members do little or nothing. In this context, what matters for the emergence of an

issue-based net is the type of relationships among the members forming the critical mass, rather than the size of the whole group.

The question is not whether it is possible to mobilize all the members of a group towards a collective action. What really matters is the emergence of a net of relationships among a small subset of actors with appropriate interests and resources so that they can act. As a result, relationships within an issue-based net may be differentiated and heterogeneous. On the one hand, a strong web of relationships is likely to be found among the small subset of interested, resourceful and particularly energetic actors leading the collective action process. On the other hand, the bulk of membership may be made up of a mass of passive actors linked by weak ties, and not directly committed to the provision of the collective benefit, though supporting it.

The following case attempts to show how the concept of issue-based net can be used for the understanding of the creation and development of export grouping schemes. Vitrocristal is a case of an export scheme made up of small- and medium-sized firms aimed at reinforcing their competitiveness by joining resources and efforts to gain an important head start in the international marketplace.

The Vitrocristal Case

The Portuguese crystal sector faced a number of important challenges by the early 90s. These had to do with a number of threats that weakened its competitive position in international markets: strong external competition, especially from Eastern Europe,

highly unionized labor force, and dependence from a small number of customers with high bargaining power. Side by side with these threats, the majority of firms had a low productivity and were highly product oriented, paying very little attention to marketing issues. This led to a reduced control over distribution channels, absence of strong brands, poor design, and difficulties in developing an integrated communication strategy.

Creating an Export Grouping Scheme

The majority of companies operating in this sector were located in Marinha Grande. Located 70 kilometers north of Lisbon, this region was an industrial district with both a national and regional significance. In fact, it accounted for 80 per cent of the Portuguese crystal production, and one third of the active labor force of the district was employed in the crystal sector.

Since most companies were facing strong problems of competitiveness, a number of entrepreneurs along with representative bodies and governmental departments developed an in-depth analysis of the industry value chain. As a result, a key measure was identified as crucial for the recovery: the mobilization of resources and efforts in order to increase the technical and commercial capabilities of the firms. This gave rise to the creation in 1994 of Vitrocristal, an export grouping scheme made up of fourteen companies.

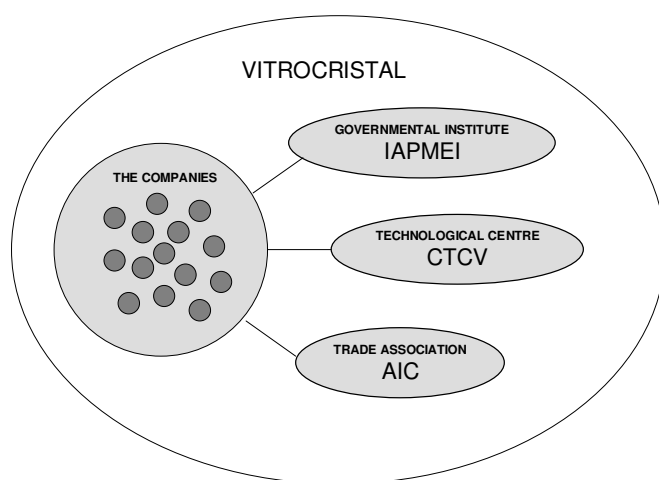
By that time, this was considered the first step to get rid of the crisis. However, two years later many things were in a standstill. The members of Vitrocristal became then

aware that other actions were needed to face the challenges of the international context where these companies were operating. Thus, some interventions in terms of brand, design, commercial conditions and new markets were searched for. It was recognized that closer relationships with the customers as well as a higher level of product differentiation were critical success factors.

An important element of this strategy was the creation of a collective brand: MGlass. Each company could use this brand in its products subject to the condition that the standards in terms of quality and design were achieved. Furthermore, there were regular inspections to the products and processes to check if the conditions were being fulfilled. In this way, under MGlass was offered a wide and differentiated product line, something that was impossible to achieve if the firms operated on their own.

The network created around the Vitrocristal case did not include only the fourteen founding firms. This alliance also involved the trade association (AIC – Associação Industrial de Cristalaria), the technological centre for glass and ceramics (CTCV – Centro Tecnológico da Cerâmica e do Vidro) and IAPMEI, the governmental institute that supports small- and medium-sized firms (see figure 1).

Figure 1 – The Vitrocrystal Export Grouping Scheme



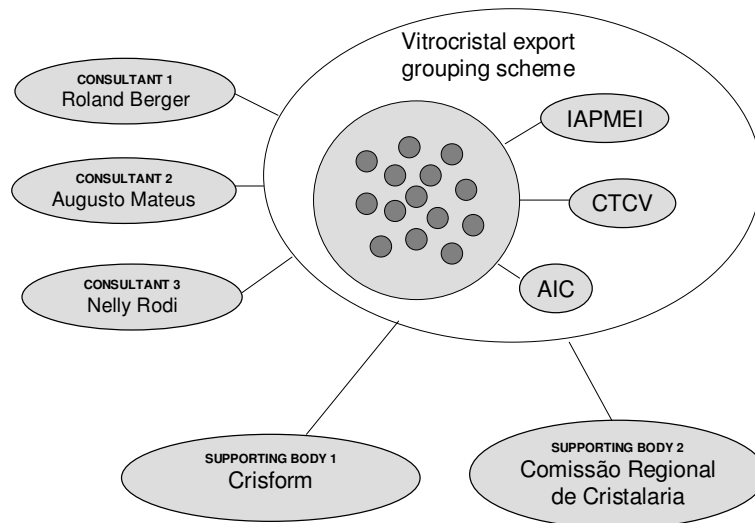
On the other hand, it was recognized that the success of the crystal industry was very much dependent on the regional development of Marinha Grande. The Glass Region was then created, aimed at articulating industrial and regional policies, and promoting a differentiated image of the Portuguese crystal products in international markets. In this way, Vitrocrystal was expected to act as a vehicle for the implementation of industrial and regional policies aggregating companies, a trade association and a support technological infrastructure. Its mission was to improve the overall competitiveness of the industry on the basis of a collaborative model with a clear geographical orientation.

Considering the strategic positioning desired for the cluster, a consultant company was hired: Roland Berger & Partners. Its selection was made taking into account that Roland Berger had a significant expertise in the glass and crystal industry throughout the world, as well as close links with the most important markets.

Meanwhile, the success of Vitrocristal required other measures such as the involvement of both a training centre (Crisform) and a regional body (CRC – Comissão Regional de Cristalaria) that aimed at promoting the region and its products. It was entitled of the involvement of all the driving forces of the region in order to capture a wide range of motivations that used the image of the district for managerial purposes. CRC was also responsible for checking if the production of crystal companies conformed the established standards.

In short, the network created to deal with the challenges faced by the Portuguese crystal firms in the early 90s was not confined to Vitrocristal, i.e. the export grouping scheme. The real issue-based net was made up of different kind of actors as shown in figure 2. Formal members were the firms, AIC, CTCV and IAPMEI. In addition, there were very close relationships with other partners such as Roland Berger, Nelly Rodi (a fashion company) and Augusto Mateus & Associados, an important Portuguese consultancy company, as well as with Crisform and CRC as mentioned earlier.

Figure 2 – The Issue-based Net




Understanding the Vitrocristal Case

In this way, the crystal issue-based net represented in figure 2 was the sampling unit. Its analysis was mainly based on primary data collected through personal interviews where informants were induced to talk about their perceptions of the issue being studied. The reasons for the concentration on individual perceptions were twofold. The first reason flowed directly from the research questions. As stated before, such questions were mainly exploratory and explanatory in nature. They were exploratory mostly because of the lack of knowledge about the kind of phenomena under study. But research questions were also explanatory because, given that they were formulated in terms of 'why' and 'how', they reflected the declared purpose of understanding of cooperation in international business rather than looking for mere descriptions of facts. Within this context, perceptual data were useful for both understanding the rationale underlying

such phenomena and suggesting directly theoretical constructs which could be strengthened by replication and extension.

Given the basic research method adopted, the sample corresponded to the crystal issue-based net. The rationale for this method stemmed from the connectedness of industrial networks which demanded that research should be carried out on a net of actors linked by both transactional and non-transactional relationships. Table 1 offers a comprehensive view of the key results of the study adopting this methodology.

Table 1 – Key Results

The Basic Collective Issue		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase competitiveness: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Increase dimension . More competencies (design, quality standards, marketing...) 		
Structure of the issue-based net		Critical Mass	Operational Issues	
Formal Actors	Informal Actors		Conjoint Resources	Coordination of Activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Companies •AIC (trade association) •CTCV (technological centre) •IAPMEI (governmental institute) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Roland Berger •Crisform •CRC (regional body) •Nelly Rodi (fashion company) •Augusto Mateus & Ass. (consultancy company) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •The initial group of companies •AIC (trade association) •IAPMEI (governmental institute) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Capital •Technological expertise •Time and effort  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •MGlass 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Establishment of protocols (quality, standards) •Development of a product line with a new brand •Training •Promotion of the region (i.e. the industrial district)

The sampling process did not follow a rigid pre-established sampling plan which should be respected in all circumstances. By contrast, it was developed while retaining some degree of flexibility. In other words, sampling was a dynamic process which evolved on the basis of the evolving theoretical relevance of concepts. This reflects two key features of the sampling process adopted. Firstly, sampling and data analysis were overlapping and interwoven tasks with mutual impacts. Secondly, it also reflects the objective of avoiding what is considered one of the most undesirable pitfalls faced by many researchers: the indiscriminate collection of data and the consequent accumulation of far more information than there will be time to study.

Taking these considerations into account, the process developed in the following way. Firstly, sampling was *a priori* opened to those incidents that were likely to provide the most relevant data about the phenomenon being studied. Secondly, as new categories were discovered and relationships among them were established, sampling became more focused on some incidents in order to uncover or validate such discoveries. Thirdly, some 'peripheral' informants - i.e. people who apparently were not closely linked with the issue under study but whose perceptions about such issues were likely to contribute to new and insightful perspectives - were also deliberately included. In this regard, the experts interviewed were typical 'peripheral' informants. Finally, sampling stopped when 'theoretical saturation' was reached. This means that sampling came to an end when "... (1) no new or relevant data seemed to emerge regarding a category; (2) the category development was dense, insofar as all of the paradigm elements were accounted for, along with variation and process; (3) the relationships between categories were well established and validated" (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 188).

Conclusion

The concept of issue-based net seems to be particularly appropriate for the study of export grouping schemes inasmuch these usually involve a collective action nature, as it happens in the Vitrocristal case. The richness of this methodological approach has to do with its systemic and dynamic character. In fact, studying an issue-based net involves both the development of a systemic view of the whole set of situations involved with a particular collective issue, and the understanding of the dynamics of industrial systems driven by the mobilization of collective interests.

The methodological approach addressed in this paper represents a development of the case study method which involves an in-depth analysis of a small number of situations or cases. In this line, an issue-based net can be regarded as a situation or a case. The importance of this concept stems from the fact that issue-based nets represent an intermediary option between two extreme alternatives: the use of focal organizations (or relationships) as sampling units versus the adoption of the overall network as unit of analysis. Taking into consideration the difficulties associated with the second option, the use of issue-based nets as sampling units can be regarded as a practical solution for capturing the connectedness character of network analyses.

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